

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 239 232

CS 007 480

AUTHOR Cranney, A. Garr
TITLE Noah Webster and William Holmes McGuffey: The Men and Their Contributions to Reading.
PUB DATE [83]
NOTE 20p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Beginning Reading; Comparative Analysis; *Educational History; *Nineteenth Century Literature; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Materials; Spelling Instruction; Teaching Methods; *United States History; Values Education
IDENTIFIERS *McGuffey (William); *Webster (Noah)

ABSTRACT

Noah Webster and William Holmes McGuffey, who made important contributions to reading and education, present an interesting study in comparison and contrast. Although Webster is remembered most as a lexicographer, his speller contributed greatly to the early teaching of reading in the United States. His literary activities as a patriot, a nationalist, and an educator desiring that America should achieve a linguistic identity apart from England were effective and impressive. A prodigious worker, scholar and writer whose writing touched many fields, he was also an active participant in religious and community affairs, an admirable husband and parent, and a businessman of energy and integrity. By contrast, McGuffey was a professor and preacher whose name was associated with the greatest publishing enterprise in American history. His reader was an improvement upon Webster's speller, and eventually replaced it as the most important medium of American reading instruction. Apart from reading instruction, the McGuffey reader also gave to the nineteenth-century American child a common value-laden body of literary reference and allusion. However unsophisticated those nineteenth-century reading instruction methods and materials may now appear, they did provide a common heritage and helped shape the American character and values of the time. (HOD)

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NOAH WEBSTER AND WILLIAM HOLMES MCGUFFEY:
THE MEN AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO READING

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A. Garr Cranney
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Brigham Young University
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(801) 378-4250 or 4805 (office)
(801) 377-4432 (home)

NOAH WEBSTER AND WILLIAM HOLMES MCGUFFEY:
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The history of reading instruction in the nineteenth century is dominated by two men, Noah Webster (1758-1843) and William Holmes McGuffey (1800-1873). Both made important contributions in reading. Both made other prominent contributions to education. Biographically, they also present an interesting study in comparison and contrast. This paper will consider their contributions to reading and other information of biographical and educational significance.

Webster's most important contribution to reading was his blueback speller. Published at the age of 25 in the last year of the American Revolution, and originally titled A Grammatical Institute of the English Language, it was to become with the McGuffey readers, the book from which most Americans learned to read in the nineteenth century. In its several editions including the major editions of 1783, 1787, 1804, and 1829, it was to sell an estimated 100 million copies. Advertised as "the cheapest, the best, and most extensively used spelling book ever published," its use is all the more remarkable when it is realized that it was selling a million copies a year when the population of the United States was but ten million people.

Historically, the blueback speller represented the alphabet method of reading instruction (Shoemaker, 1966). In both England and America this was the traditional method of teaching reading. Using older British spellers by Dilworth and Fenning as models, Webster's speller required children to first learn the alphabet and its corresponding sounds. Sounds of letter combinations followed, then single syllable words, and eventually

longer words. Later lessons presented full sentences. Syllables and words were learned by rote memorization and oral drill by spelling aloud before any reading for meaning was attempted. In the first edition, for example, reading for meaning is not introduced until the thirty-seventh lesson. For some young children the learning of letters and their sounds in this manner required more than a year of tedious drill. The emphasis on sounds of letters and syllables spelled aloud was based on the supposition that reading was primarily oral and that learning to spell and read was closely related to learning to speak. Compared to previous spellers of his time, Webster altered the usual method of dividing syllables, included lists of American rather than British place names, classified words by pronunciation rather than spelling, and provided a detailed numbered pronunciation key that was an improvement over previous spellers. Later, in 1829, he introduced a diacritical marking system that was widely adopted.

Webster's emphasis on oral drill and learning of sounds and letters disconnected from actual reading is based on what we now call paired associate learning. For children of the twentieth century, it would now be considered a difficult way to learn. Modern methods tend to emphasize reading for meaning, as for example in the language experience approach. Recognizing familiar words by sight rather than by letter sounds may also be stressed. By contrast, the memorized lists in "old blueback" contained many words that were meaningless to the children of that time. In later editions, Webster would add short stories, fables, and a few pictures. His speller, however, is best remembered in the history of reading for its emphasis on the learning of reading through letters, syllables, and

their sounds. Reading for meaning as an instruction technique would be more developed via the McGuffey readers. As a refined instructional method, however, involving sight words and methods geared to the interests of children, it would not be in general use till the twentieth century.

Webster's emphasis on oral reading and pronunciation not only reflected long standing reading instruction methods of the time, but reflected his desire for a common national language free from Europe's regional dialect problems and culturally independent from England. Though in later life he would soften his nationalistic approach to language, Webster's efforts brought about important changes in spelling, clarified and standardized pronunciation, and taught more than one generation of Americans how to read. Present day common spellings attributed to Webster are honor, favor and color without the "u"; theater without a final "e"; and music and public without a final "k." He was also the first American to write for and capture the U.S. textbook market.

Webster's business interests in his publications are worthy of note. He was a vigorous promoter of his books undertaking lecture tours, advertising, presenting examination copies, engaging in literary defense of criticism of his work, seeking endorsements from educators and public figures, publicizing adoptions, and later in life employing agents. He sought and obtained state and federal copyright regulation, dealt with many publishers, and entered into what may have been the first American royalty agreement for his work. In 1804, he contracted an agreement where income was to have a relationship with the number of copies sold.

By that agreement he received 1¢ a copy for his speller which sold for not less than 16¢ "in common binding with scaleboard, covered with blue paper." Income from his speller is said to have supported him for the twelve of the twenty-eight years required to write his dictionary. Yet, during most of his life he had a very modest and at times insufficient income, having to sell future publishing rights to his work to meet pressing financial needs. From his greatest work, the dictionary, he realized little income and on several occasions had to move when his scholarly ventures did not produce enough income to support a large family.

His general educational ideas are significant to an understanding of his published work. At various times in his life, he had been engaged at many levels of education. As a teacher and director of private elementary and secondary schools, and as one of the principal founders of Amherst College, he had educational experiences and wrote texts that earned him a biographer's title of "Schoolmaster to America" (Warfel, 1966). His ideas on education were systematic and comprehensive. He thought that education should be American, universal, pragmatic, and scientific. He disparaged the practice of classical education, the study of Greek and Latin, and supported a traditional homemaking curriculum for women. He was opposed to the Bible being used as a school book since he considered over familiarity with that text would produce irreverence. He supported teacher training, having taught in a time when convicts from Europe were used as school teachers and standards were virtually nonexistent. He considered the communication skills developed in some standardized way to be a unifying force in his young country--hence

his concern with reading, writing and speaking--and a distaste for slavish copying of anything foreign. This was a concern of importance in his career, "that all should speak and write alike." Political and social harmony in his view could be promoted by a standardized language common in pronunciation, spelling, and the definitions of words.

Webster is most remembered for his dictionary, a monumental work published in two volumes in 1828 after more than 20 years of preparation. In it he traced each of his 70,000 entries through 20 languages to discover root meanings and then carefully composed his definitions. On both sides of the Atlantic the work was well received and soon supplanted Johnson's earlier, more famous dictionary in England. At the age of 80, much to the consternation of his family, he mortgaged his home to revise his dictionary. After his death, publishing rights to the dictionary were sold for \$3,000 to Merriam and Sons. For a time, a dictionary war ensued with another compilation by Joseph Worcester published in England, but with the appearance of the first unabridged edition in 1864, Webster's Dictionary was soon acknowledged to be the authority in the field. In modern perspective, a third unabridged edition by the same publisher was printed in 1981 at a cost of well over three million dollars and was prepared by a large number of editors and specialists. Many other modern dictionaries of several types also use his name in their titles but did not involve his participation.

Another significant side of Webster was his religiosity. Raised a Connecticut congregationalist in a strict Calvinistic tradition, his

speller and other published works reflect his religious interests and those of his times in education. Though those ideas changed somewhat after a religious conversion in 1808, his published work consistently reflected moral and religious teachings. His speller in its first edition was concerned with scriptural teachings of the young, though less so in later editions. A Bible literalist, he believed that the origin of spoken and written language was by divine gift. He believed the Tower of Babel account and the dispersion of peoples and languages through the sons of Noah. In 1833 at the age of 74, he also produced an edition of the Bible which he hoped would be his most important work. In this he removed or edited immodest passages, archaic expressions, and awkward grammar. He believed his responsibilities to his family to be a divine stewardship and was said by his granddaughter to pray three times daily. His dictionary definitions and many other writings allude to Biblical scriptures and other personal religious beliefs. He regarded the founding of the United States as a providential event, contributed financially to missionary causes, and with his family was an active church member wherever he lived.

Like his friend Benjamin Franklin, Webster's interests and scholarship cut across many fields. His interactions with prominent Americans probably encouraged the breadth and depth of his interests. He numbered among his acquaintances such men as George Washington, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, Daniel Webster (no relation), John Quincy Adams, Benjamin Rush, and John Jay. He was invited to dine with Andrew Jackson and spoke before Congress. A Yale graduate with a degree in law, he was active politically and a propagandist for the American Revolution, the

adoption of the Constitution, and the chief literary spokesman for Federalism. He was elected to local legislatures in two states, served briefly on military duty in the revolution, edited magazines and newspapers, translated many European articles for his publications, and wrote a two volume history of pestilential diseases which was in its time, a model of data collection and research. He wrote on the financial effects of slavery, researched his genealogy, published textbooks on history and biology, and preserved Governor John Winthrop's 1630 journal by editing and publishing it himself. He wrote a biographical anthology, a grammar, a reader, and revised several of his best known works through several editions. He was knowledgeable about the techniques of publishing and printing. He observed and wrote about natural phenomena in his Amherst period and wrote on agricultural subjects and city planning. On one occasion he traveled to Europe to research his dictionary. When he retired from publishing, he had produced enough original copy to fill 20 volumes (Balmuth, 1982). His correspondence, which also has been preserved and published, is diverse and voluminous. He played the flute, gave singing instruction, directed church choirs, and according to his biographers, was an admirable husband and father to his eight children and adopted grandchild. Though much involved in the business affairs of publishing, he was a man of strict integrity, devout in his faith, and certainly a prodigious scholar. He had the capacity for intense work and as his son-in-law wrote, "carrying on numerous and diversified employments at the same time." His energy in his old age he attributed to a proper balance of mental and physical exercise, a practice which he followed most of his life.

Though most biographers take a celebrationist view of his life, Webster was not without fault. His ideas evolved and changed, sometimes contradicting each other at different periods in his life. The fervency of his patriotism in the early years of the United States mellowed as he observed the developing problems of the young republic. He was not successful as a lawyer. He reacted strongly and forthrightly to criticism in both politics and educational matters. He was said by some to be socially unattractive and at times vain. Many of his recommendations for changes in orthography were not adopted and were considered too radical; for example, changing the spelling of "is" to "iz." Many of his ideas such as his word etymologies were in conflict with other scholarship of his time. Some of his ideas, for example on the education of women, seem inappropriate and repressive in a modern perspective. One biographer (Rollins, 1980) has regarded the later period of his life as a time of religious introversion and disillusionment with society, though most do not agree with such an interpretation (Monaghan, 1983). But on balance, his biographers, his published writing, and a large correspondence which has been preserved, present an impressive picture of a patriot, a family and religious man, an indefatigable worker, writer and scholar, educator, editor, and researcher of many topics. He died at the age of 85, just as he had finished correcting a new printing of his speller.

William Holmes McGuffey

As prominent educators McGuffey and Webster were acquainted with each other's work. McGuffey used Webster's pronunciation rules in his readers and competed successfully with his speller. Webster's speller

in time fell into disuse as a book to teach reading but survived well in the second half of the nineteenth century as an authority on spelling. Though there was some friendly correspondence acknowledging their acquaintance and mutual respect, there is no evidence the two men ever personally met.

The six McGuffey readers, the first two of which appeared in 1836, were eventually to sell over 122 million copies by 1920 (Vail, 1911). They were enormously popular in the second half of the nineteenth century, eclipsing all other readers and became the base of publishing fortunes for some of their several publishers. Major editions revised in 1853, 1857, and 1879 were distributed by the trainload primarily from their publishing base in Cincinnati. From these books most American children in the nineteenth century learned how to read. As they progressed from beginning reading into the fifth and sixth readers, compiled by McGuffey's younger lawyer-brother Alexander, they were also exposed to the best of English and American literature. The values taught by that literature and the children's stories in the beginning readers were said by historians to have both reflected and shaped the mind and character of America (Mosier, 1965; Cremin, 1980). Even after 1900 as they began to disappear from American schools, they inspired the founding of many McGuffey societies in the twentieth century (Scully, 1967). These groups held national conventions, met regularly, and were dedicated to preserving the values the readers taught. The readers were also translated into German, Spanish and Japanese, were quoted in Presidential campaigns, and were used in public schools as late as 1961 in Wisconsin. As of today, McGuffey's name appears on the buildings of three campuses and

on a university reading center. A monument and a library also commemorate his work on an Ohio campus. At the expense of Henry Ford, McGuffey's birthplace in Pennsylvania was restored, moved to Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan, and a special edition of his books reprinted in 1928. Today the readers are still available in limited reprinted editions and are occasionally used in a few instructional settings by those who admire the instruction and especially the values of the readers.

As methodology in reading instruction, the McGuffey readers represented an improvement over Webster's speller. The improvement was one of degree rather than kind, however. The alphabet method of learning to read was still primary but McGuffey eliminated spelling as a preliminary unit of mastery prior to the reading step (Minnich, 1966). He proceeded directly from the learning of the alphabet and its sounds to reading, then used spelling as a means to learn the words of the reading text. Simple sentences and stories in this way were introduced much earlier and the initial time spent on spelling drills of unfamiliar words and syllables not comprehended by children was substantially reduced. Instruction in this manner took advantage of reading for meaning, though spelling still received much more emphasis than it does today. The readers were written so as to increase in difficulty and were used throughout the secondary school years, the upper level readers being in effect literary anthologies. Though modern readability measures were not known to McGuffey, the books respond well to their claim to a graduated increase in difficulty when current measures are applied (Dolch, 1945).

Other characteristics of the readers which contributed to their success were the wide and skillful use of pictures, a comparative rarity up to this time. The emphasis on oral reading and pronunciation guides present in Webster was continued in the McGuffey readers with specific directions of how to articulate, use tone, inflection, modulation, gestures, and emphasis. In some editions comprehension questions intended to direct inferential thinking and comprehension were pioneered. Writing or script exercises were added in later editions. The use of the word "eclectic" in the title of the McGuffey readers designating that they drew from many sources also fit the temper of the times. The intrinsic literary merit of both the stories and literary selections at a time when there was no recognized body of children's literature was an important characteristic. Additionally, the standards of social life set up in each of the readers appealed to the very diverse American population of the nineteenth century; "enough Puritan to fit the religious mental mode of the descendents of the land company; enough cavalier to fit into the moral and mental mode of the blue blood of Kentucky, Virginia, and North Carolina; enough economic to fit into the thrifty mental mode of the Germans and Scots" (Hobson, 1954).

A striking characteristic of the McGuffey readers was the comparative cheerfulness of their tone. Unlike many of their predecessors, the stories were written to appeal to children. Children romp and play and express authentic, childlike feelings. Birds sing, the snow falls, and nature is present in all its beauty. Animals become delightful human companions, teaching the virtues of loyalty, kindness, and devotion. Part of this shift in tone can be attributed to the more optimistic

temper of Western life. By contrast, the somber adult centered materials such as The New England Primer were more pervaded with death, sin, and temptation. In such books children were treated as little adults. The model of their proper behavior was characterized by extreme restraint and the problems of overcoming sin in a degenerate world. By contrast the McGuffey readers, though moral and at times religious, taught their lessons with charm in a way that made them attractive and interesting to children. Children were presented as living in their own world, but it was a world painted in the bright colors of youth rather than in the grays and blacks of infant damnation and original sin.

Biographically, McGuffey presents an interesting comparison to Webster. Son of an Indian scout in a large family, McGuffey lived most of his life in Ohio. As a teenager he too was an itinerant school teacher who was fortunate to get an advanced education, was much influenced by his religious mother, and by his minister-teachers through secondary and college years. Unlike Webster, however, who depended primarily on publication income for his livelihood, McGuffey spent most of his life employed by universities in Ohio and Virginia. Successively he taught at Miami University (1826-1836), was President of Cincinnati College (1836-1839), and Ohio University (1839-1843). In 1845 he moved to the University of Virginia where he taught until his death in 1873. He also briefly taught languages at Woodward College in Cincinnati from 1843-1845.

It was while at Miami University in Ohio that the readers were conceived. His ideas and methods grew from teaching neighborhood children in his backyard experimental school. Eventually, he was approached

by a Cincinnati publisher who had been directed to him by the Beecher family, friends and also prominent educators in the area. The ensuing agreement was for ten percent royalties up to \$1,000, all excess profits to revert to the publisher. In his later Virginia years he received annually a small stipend and some Christmas gifts from a different but grateful publisher. Actually, after the first editions, McGuffey had little to do with the readers that bore his name. Though many of the original selections survived revised editions, a number of skillful and competent editors made changes to meet the needs of the times, competition from other readers, and occasional criticism of the series. Seven parent publishers successively and skillfully handled the readers.

McGuffey, like Webster, did not consider himself a specialist in reading. His four main interests as an educator were moral and mental philosophy, religion, elocution and debate, and the education of children. He devoted himself to the establishment of the common or public schools in Ohio and Virginia and was instrumental in obtaining legislation promoting state organization and growth of those schools.

It was as a university teacher and ordained part-time Presbyterian preacher that he is most remembered by his contemporaries. He was said to have an exceptional memory and at a young age could recite verbatim many books of the Bible. Many of his university students reported that, above all, he stimulated them to think. He was especially adroit at clarifying by simple illustration the abstract principles of mental and moral philosophy. His was an age in which character education involving moral and religious prescriptions were customary. It was therefore a natural outlet for his religious propensities to conduct early morning

university religious services and to preach at local churches on Sunday. As such an orator he was well known and much admired. He rarely wrote out his three thousand sermons, choosing to let the inspiration of the moment and his extemporaneous rapport with the congregation dictate the manner in which his subject was presented. His eloquence as both a teacher and a preacher was said to be effective and popular but also natural and unaffected. He enjoyed teaching elocution and debate although his specialty was moral and mental philosophy, a mixture of psychology, prescriptive religion, and philosophy that was consistent with higher education of the times. He used some notes when he taught and would allow himself to be examined by students in a questioning period at the end of each class. He dressed quaintly and conservatively in a stovepipe hat, dark clerical tie, black bombazine suit, and carried an ebony cane (Westerhoff, 1978). Balding and bespectacled in some photographs, it is said he maintained an emotional distance from his students but was admired and beloved by them.

Unlike Webster, he published little. Four manuscripts on mental philosophy, only one of which was published, were authored late in life. In addition to his readers, less than ten other articles or stories bearing his name were published.

Like Webster, he had his problems and faults. He was not effective as a teenage elementary school teacher. An arch conservative, he came into conflict with other faculty members and authorities at several universities where he worked. Though he mellowed with age, he was at times extreme and uncompromising in matters of student discipline. As a college president he was neither successful nor popular. His tenure

at Ohio University was marked by hostility of the townspeople towards several of his decisions. On more than one occasion he found it necessary to defend himself physically as he walked about the town. In fairness, however, both of his presidencies were marked by financial problems that were essentially beyond his control. He knew sorrow and grief. His first wife and four of his six children succumbed to various diseases of the time. Like Webster he was a hard worker, arose early and enjoyed long vigorous walks. Late in life, while at the University of Virginia, he cultivated grapes as a hobby and was known for his kindness to black people in the Charlottesville area.

Conclusion

Though Webster is remembered most as a lexicographer, his speller made an important contribution to the early teaching of reading in the United States. His literary activities as a patriot, a nationalist, and as an educator who desired that America should linguistically achieve her own identity apart from England, were effective and impressive. A prodigious worker, scholar, and writer whose writing touched many fields, he was also active in religious and community affairs, an admirable husband and parent, and a businessman of energy and integrity.

By contrast, McGuffey was a professor and preacher whose name was associated with the greatest publishing enterprise in American history. His readers were an improvement upon, and eventually replaced, Webster's speller as the most important medium of American reading instruction. Though both men followed the alphabet method of teaching reading, they largely ignored the newer things being said about the word method of

teaching reading in Europe and by Horace Mann in Massachusetts. It remained to the progressive education movement to popularize and refine those ideas at a later time.

Apart from reading instruction but more significant from the social historian's perspective was not the contribution of the McGuffey readers to education or reading but to something else. The McGuffey readers gave to the American child of the nineteenth century what he so conspicuously lacks today--a common value-laden body of literary reference and allusion. "The readers were always there to be remembered and quoted and you could be reasonably sure that your audience would share your recollection and recognize the quotation" (Commager, 1962). Sentimental and quaint as some would perceive them now, the stories of Hugh Idle and Mr. Toil, Lazy Ned, and Meddlesome Mattie claimed the attention and the affections of several generations of Americans. Here also was "Abou Ben Adam," "Thanatopsis," "Hamlet's soliloquy," the "Village Blacksmith," "Song of the Shirt," and the "Death of Absalom." Here was "The Folly of Intoxication," "How to Tell Bad News," "Control Your Temper," and "No Excellence Without Labor." Here also was "Don't Kill the Birds," "When to Say No," "Dare to Do Right," and "God is Everywhere" (McGuffey, 1879). In the childrens' stories virtue was rewarded, and evil punished, unusually instantaneously just after a good or bad act was committed. Their moral messages were direct and uncomplicated. There was no equivocating. The right, the good, and religious always triumphed.

However unsophisticated those methods and materials of reading instruction in the nineteenth century may now appear, they did provide a common heritage and helped shape the American character and values of

the time. To some lesser degree, this influence carried over into the first half of the twentieth century as the McGuffey school children became adults and remembered with affection what they had read and memorized so long ago. Many of them could still "declaim" or recite verbatim those stories, speeches, and poems when they were adults. In this sense the legacy of the McGuffey readers was more moral than educational. It was more character education than reading instruction, but significant and beneficent nonetheless.

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